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ABSTRACT

Attitudes toward usage, accent, and dialect in spoken English are examined, drawing on literature in the field and data from a British study of year 9 students' (pupils aged 13-14) language awareness. The dilemma inherent in teaching standard spoken usage while encouraging maintenance of ethnic and regional identity is examined, with attention given to ambiguity and discrepancy in some public policy and policymakers' statements, particularly in regard to national curriculum policy. Comments and discussions occurring in the mass media are also addressed, and utterances of students in the study are analyzed. It is concluded that further discussion of language attitudes, particularly concerning accent and dialect and concepts of "good" and "bad" usage is needed, and that teachers can play an important role by bringing discussion of language issues into the classroom. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE)

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CENTRE FOR LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

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'SPEAKING PROPER': ACCENT, DIALECT AND IDENTITY

JANET HOOPER

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'SPEAKING PROPER': ACCENT, DIALECT AND IDENTITY

This paper draws in part on a project funded by the ESRC from 1991 - 1993, entitled "**'Knowledge About Language', Language Learning and the National Curriculum**". The study was an empirical investigation of the teaching of English and of Modern Foreign Languages at Year 9 (pupils aged 13-14) in three case-study schools, which documented, through both observation and interview, teachers' current beliefs and practices with regard to Knowledge About Language (KAL). It was also an attempt to explore the state of Year 9 pupils' knowledge, beliefs and understandings with regard to language, elicited largely through a range of group discussion and problem-solving tasks covering five distinct KAL areas. This paper draws on one of those areas, concerning the issue of accent and dialect.

The overall KAL study is reported in Occasional Paper 19.

* * * *

Anybody reading newspapers in Britain over the past few years would know that teachers have been made scapegoats for the supposed drop in standards of the language of the nation's children.

> 'So wot if I dont write proper? Miss says my spelling dont matter cos thats how I talk' (Independent on Sunday, 7.2.93)

Why can't teachers simply teach children to speak and write 'properly'? The 'back to basics' movement demands that teachers teach children to speak and write 'correct' and 'proper' English: what, after all, could be more simple?

It is my intention to examine spoken English in this context, and to suggest that it is far from being a simple, clear-cut issue. Indeed, in the area of accent and dialect in particular, it is difficult to separate out the basic issues from the complex, often contradictory, attitudes which their discussion arouses. For the whole notion of identity is bound up with the way we view the use of language, both our own and others':

> "Because language is a fundamental part of being human, it is an important aspect of a person's sense of self; because it is a fundamental feature of any community, it is an important aspect of a person's sense of social identity" (DES/WO, 1989, para. 6.18)

Nonetheless, the fierce disapproval directed at other people's language is still somewhat surprising, particularly in an age when verbal assaults of a similar nature on other features of people's identity - race, gender, religion - would hardly be tolerated, officially at least. A trawl of recent press coverage of the issue, typically in response to the publication of official reports, uncovers frequent references to 'bad English, poor grammar, sloppy talk, shoddy standards', together with criticism of a more implicit nature, such as the following:

"According to Kenneth Baker's curriculum advisers, it's orl roight ter spik loike this, perviding yu can get yer act togevver wen it comes ter puttin' wurds dahn on piper. [..] the 'ole cuntry'll en' up not jes' spikin' loike this but writin' gibberish too" (Today, 23.6.89)

The message here is that speaking 'loike this' is unintelligible and meaningless ('gibberish'), to be held up for ridicule, and that it will entail similarly poor written English; "some kinds of English really are more worthwhile than others", the editorial continues. But what is the nature of the speech thus lampooned? Essentially it consists of an attempt at writing down an accent which is a mish-mash of rural ('roight, loike') and urban features ('dahn on piper'), with a bit of slang thrown in for good measure ('get your act together'). In short, if you want to speak properly, make sure you get rid of your accent!

Other papers appearing on the same day made fun of accents too: the Daily Star, for example, under the headline 'Cor blimey would you Adam and Eve it?', announced that "It ain't arf OK for kids not to talk proper"; and the Sun's headline declared ''Ere! Now kids don't 'ave to talk proper'. And consider the conflicting messages of the Sun's editorial:

"It is absurd not to correct children who use bad English. [..] It does not matter what your accent is - Cockney, Yorkshire, Lancashire or Scottish - as long as WHAT you say is proper English" (Sun, 23.6.89)

It is clear that the Sun's editor isn't saying what he means: the speaker's accent is claimed to be separate from the issue of 'bad' and 'proper' English, yet the paper characterises poor English in its headline at least partly as a result of accent (in this case, dropped aitches). And the serious professional press may be just as bad; the Times Educational Supplement, in a front-page article in response to the NCC's advising the revision of the English proposals (NCC, 1992), quite baldly confused non-standard grammar and pronunciation, and criticised both alike:

"From the age of five, the nation's children may now be encouraged to pick up their aitches and drop the ubiquitous glottal stops, aint and other manifestations of non-U grammar" (TES, 25.9.92, added emphasis)

It is clearly the case that, in spite of pronouncements to the contrary, 'proper' English involves not just grammar (and vocabulary), but pronunciation too: in this case, dropped aitches and glottal stops are criticised. But neither the Sun nor the TES seems to realise that these are features of the regional accents that they profess to admire:

"With regional accents allowed to remain, the result is likely to be that BBC English is once again a model for the nation" (ibid.)

What are we to make of the conflicting messages here? (1) It's okay to keep your regional accent ("Cockney, Yorkshire, Lancashire or Scottish"); so long as (2) you don't pronounce 'right' and 'like' as 'roight, loike' (sorry, you Westcountry folk!), or 'down' and 'paper' as 'dahn on piper' (a blow to you Cockneys, this one). And you certainly mustn't drop your aitches - well, that takes care of a number of 'regional' accents then, doesn't it?

What do the educational policy-makers have to say on the issue? Policy proposals in the recent debate on the English curriculum officially endorsed the view that accent and dialect are separate:

> "dialect [..] refer[s] to grammar and vocabulary, but not to accent" (DES/WO, 1989, 4.9)

Indeed, they have gone further in implying that different accents have equal social status - with the notable exception of Received Pronunciation (RP), sometimes called 'BBC English', or what the pupils in our study referred to as speaking 'posh'. This message is clearly not the same as that put across by the editors of the popular press, however! And, indeed, this claim to equal status runs counter to findings of much contemporary research, which has shown that regional variation in pronunciation is socially stigmatised (cf. Trudgill 1983 for a review; or simply ask anyone you know with a marked regional accent).

There is clearly a good deal of muddle in this whole area. On the one hand, policy statements officially recognise the integrity of regional dialects and accents, while proclaiming standard English as the common currency, the entitlement of all. On the other hand, it is clear that, in practice, different varieties of English do not enjoy equal status, and that there is a clear popular divide between what is variously perceived as good, proper, correct English and what is considered bad, poor and incorrect. Thus, while the press disparages non-standard ('incorrect') features of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary, the proposed revision of the English curriculum (DFE/WO 1993) announces:

> "Spoken standard English can be expressed in a variety of regional and social accents. The requirement to speak standard English does not undermine the integrity of either regional accents or dialects" [9]

Yet, with a scattering of words throughout ('correct, accurate, logical'), the document makes clear an underlying message: that non-standard dialects do not in any way have equal status with standard English. How then is 'standard English' defined? It is clear that the Report has no problem with seeing it as a simple concept: it is, quite simply, characterised by "the correct use of vocabulary and grammar" (ibid., 6), and may be spoken with any accent. Earlier documents were not so cavalier with their definitions; the original version of the English proposals (DES/WO 1989) in particular, was at pains to point out that the forms of non-standard dialects are equally grammatical and rule-governed (4.14), and that standard English should not be confused with 'good' English, that it is simply a "dialect which has particular uses" (4.10). This clearly cut little ice, however, with the chairman of the National Curriculum Council three years later, who had no problem reconciling his 'respect' for dialects with an unproblematic view of standard (i.e. 'correct') English:

> "you don't speak sloppily, you use tenses and prepositions properly, you don't say 'He done it' and you don't split infinitives [..] I don't think that most people would dispute what standard English is. 'He done it' is speaking English incorrectly. That's bad grammar." (Independent on Sunday, 13.9.92)

Nonetheless, even where the issues involved were up for discussion, a fairly clear consensus seemed to emerge. The implication of the English reports was of a standard English that overlay a neat map of regional variation, with strongly-bounded dialects, each with its own distinctive grammar and vocabulary. The standard version could be spoken with different accents, and only one of these (RP) was particularly marked for status.

Research suggests, however, that the boundaries of regional dialects cannot now be sharply delineated. Writing in the late eighties, Cheshire and Trudgill reported that factors such as increasing geographical mobility, education, centralisation and urbanisation are contributing to the gradual erosion of traditional regional variation in English, although they also point to the continuing development of divergent urban dialects (Cheshire et al. 1989, 94). They emphasise the "continuum-like nature of linguistic variation in Britain" (95), and talk of the difficulty of identifying discrete regional and social dialects, since varieties tend to merge into one another. They also suggest that accent and dialect normally go together, "to the extent that we have usually to consider an accent as an integral part of a particular dialect" (94). Elsewhere, Cheshire also points out that those non-standard forms that are very widespread are now less likely to be linked to a particular region, and, as a consequence, tend to be stigmatised (Milroy and Milroy 1987, 1: 10). Such features are very likely to include the following (extracted from Trudgill 1983, 188-189):

Multiple negation	e.g. 'I don't eat none of that'
Present tense verb forms	e.g. 'I wants it'
Past tense verb forms	e.g. 'He give it me yesterday'
Past tense of 'be'	e.g. 'We was playing / I weren't'
Negative of 'have' and 'be'	e.g. 'We ain't got one' / 'It ain't that big'
Reflexive pronouns	e.g. 'He done it hisself'
Adverbs	e.g. 'He done it nice'

There are some familiar faces here:

"Grammatical horrors such as 'We wuz robbed' and 'We winned at cricket'" (Daily Mirror, 16.4.93)

"bad phrases such as 'We was late back from the trip', 'Pass me them books' and 'We ain't seen nobody'" (Sun, 16.4.93)

"ungrammatical phrases such as 'you ain't seen nothing yet'" (Daily Mail, 16.4.93)

It is evident from popular press coverage of language issues that it is largely the same small number of grammatical features that recur in complaints about language use, and which were quickly picked up by the

national press in reaction to the new proposals. In fact, what is quite a small set of non-standard grammatical features tending to be very widespread now throughout the British Isles, and occurring in a number of different dialects, bears the weight of much of the criticism aimed at non-standard, 'incorrect' English. Such features were specifically referred to in the original English curriculum proposals as "undoubtedly a social irritant" (DES/WO 1989, 4.14) The follow-up proposals were rather more blunt, and proposed that the speech of primary school pupils should include, by level 5, for example, "correct use of pronouns; negative forms: avoiding double negatives; consistent use of verb tenses" (DFE/WO 1993, 17).

The more heavyweight press presents an argument which suggests that there are only two positions to be taken, one which is self-evidently true, and one which is, by implication, devoid of sense. Thus, the Times speaks of the new English curriculum (the 1993 proposed version) reviving "an orthodoxy so obvious that it should not have to be forced back into the classroom [..] Children should learn to spell, punctuate and write grammatically", and claims it extraordinary that "such simple ideas" should be challenged (16.4.93 editorial). Similarly, former NCC chair David Pascall writes in the Telegraph that "parents need to appreciate the simple but vital issues at stake" (29.4.93). If what is at issue is indeed so straightforward, one is left to ponder why such a battle rages then. Why do these non-standard features persist in language, in the face of such heavy opposition? Is it all the fault of the teachers after all?

Researchers in the field (e.g. Milroy and Milroy 1991) point out that the history of English has been one of progressive standardisation, originally motivated by various social, political and commercial needs. The effect of this has been to legitimise one particular form of the language as against any others, in this case, the more formal registers of standard English rather than the norms of everyday spoken English:

> "The standard ideology encourages prescription in language, dedicated to the principle that there must be one, and only one, correct way of using a linguistic item (at the level of pronunciation, spelling, grammar and, to a great extent, meaning)" (52)

The authors also point out that such attempts at standardisation are never wholly successful; although broad consensus has been achieved on the norms of written language, spoken variations continue to flourish. However, the standardisation process might also be seen to have succeeded in promoting a standard idelogy, that is, a public consciousness of the standard, such that people believe there is a 'right' way of using English, even though they may not necessarily use the 'correct' forms themselves (ibid., 30). When people talk about speech that is 'good, proper, correct, logical' and so forth, they are parading a set of beliefs promoted by the standardisation process; they are voicing convictions, rather than truths, about the nature of language. While it is undoubtedly true that certain varieties of language are preferred over others, and enjoy social prestige, it cannot be proved that any language or dialect in itself is better or Oworse than any other. The popular view nonetheless seems to be that standard English is intrinsically better than other regional and social varieties. Given the apparent widespread consensus on this issue, then, why do non-standard varieties so doggedly persist?

Research suggests that there are two conflicting forces at work on language use: alongside institutional pressures to conform to the standard in speech, with the economic and social advantages thereby expected to accrue, speakers of non-standard varieties are also subject to pressures exerted by informal ties of kin and friendship (Milroy and Milroy 1991, 58). Speakers of non-standard dialects in close-knit communities have to weigh the potential benefits of adopting standard English against its disadvantages. In short, they are choosing between status and solidarity, and it would appear that, in many cases, solidarity wins out against social and economic interests. People choose to speak as their family and friends speak, rather than distance themselves from their local communities by 'speaking posh'. (It should be noted that, in many cases, such choices operate at a level below consciousness.) There is, in any case, a permanent tension in language use resulting from these competing pressures.

The current ideology seems, at the time of writing, to be moving more in the direction of hard prescriptivism, with progressively less tolerance accorded to non-standard varieties of language. This tendency is shown particularly in the first English curriculum revision proposals (DFE/WO 1993a), with the requirements on standard English being simultaneously extended down the age range and into the area of speaking as well as writing. The concept of <u>choice</u> in language seems to be losing out to the demands of uniformity. Similarly, speaking and writing are, to all intents and purposes, taken to be one and the same, ignoring issues of style, audience and purpose; the emphasis is firmly on usage which is 'correct', 'accurate' and 'logical'. This hardline (and 'commonsense') prescriptivism is nicely encapsulated in a recent Times editorial entitled 'Logic of grammar' (22.4.92):

> "Children will never learn to speak and write properly if, for instance, their teachers tell them that 'we was' is as 'valid' as 'we were'. [..] Grammar is not a series of options. There is correct standard English and there is bad English. If children want to use slang in the street, then fine - but only if they know better. If they want to improve themselves, they need to know how to speak and write properly when the occasion requires. [..] What hope has an unemployed teenager of finding a job if he [sic] cannot fill in a form correctly or write a grammatical letter? [..] bad grammar is a sign of carelessness in the use of language, which denotes a lack of mental discipline in other areas. [..] Children will suffer if they are not taught rigorously. Opportunities will be denied them and they will be trapped by their own inarticulateness"

I cite this at length, since it displays nicely most of the characteristics associated with the strong prescriptivist stance. There is a strict insistence on the standard language being logical, good, correct and proper, and the non-standard bad, careless and illogical. There is also a marked tendency to associate use of non-standard grammatical features with cognitive and social deficit, "lack of mental discipline [..] inarticulateness", these speakers need "to improve themselves", or they will be "trapped", they will "suffer". And the writer in his hardline dogmatism is apparently unable to perceive even the inconsistency of his own internal arguments:

> "As the English professor, Northrop Frye, once said: 'There is only one way to degrade mankind permanently and that is to destroy language.'"

Destroying language means destroying the standard version only, according to this argument; too bad for people who don't speak the 'correct' variety.

In the aim of pursuing standardisation of the spoken language, then, specific non-standard features of both accent and grammar are censured, and are separated from the 'true' features of regional dialects (which are to be respected and preserved) - whatever these are. It seems that some accents and dialects are more acceptable than others; and it appears, perhaps not unsurprisingly, to be socio-economic factors that come most into play here. Those features of accent and dialect which come in for most criticism appear to be those most obviously associated with urbanised rather than rural areas (or those which it is most difficult to assign to one particular region), and with lower socio-economic status. Research, for example, points to the stigmatisation of pronunciation features (such as the dropping of aitches) associated most strongly with speakers who are men and/or working-class, and, similarly, indicates that regularly stigmatised grammatical features ('we was', 'I ain't', etc.) are more commonly used by people in lower social groups.

Our own study of 13-14 year olds in the south-east of England (in the school year 1991-1992) showed that 'bad' speech was characterised most frequently in terms of widespread pronunciation features. Thus, there were specific references to dropped letters, predominantly 'h' and 't' (e.g. 'bo(tt)le', 'wa(t)er', the ubiquitous glottal stop!), while a third of the groups in some way referred to a London (or 'Cockney') accent as being 'common', as not speaking 'properly'. Significantly also, although pupils did not overtly mention 'grammar' but instead considered 'words' (or 'slang words') as the other main defining characteristic of improper or incorrect speech, 'ain't' was the example most commonly cited. Pupils also seemed well aware of the social connotations of people's speech styles, as shown most strongly in the following comment:

> "it's probably because she like lives on a council estate and that in say Manchester or London, where everyone else is talking like slang like that, and she just talks the same as them, and now she just does, and that's why it sounds common because she's not using .. proper English or anything"

There was then a clear awareness of accent as a social marker:

> "it's your accent innit, really, makes you common"

> "proper English is where every word's pronounced correctly, isn't it?"

> "I have to speak quite posh to my Mum, because she doesn't like how I speak, she says .. she says that it sounds common, so I have to try and say my words prop- .. properly"

It is interesting to note that there was little evidence of the adult preoccupation with grammar as such; aside from the several mentions of 'ain't', the only other grammatical features mentioned were non-standard variations on verb forms and double negatives, and then only sparingly. However, in a separate activity, where pupil groups were asked to discuss a small number of written utterances in matched standard and non-standard

forms, it was quite clear that pupils were applying the same value-system as their elders, with talk of 'common' and 'proper' speech spontaneously arising.

> "like me, I, my school friends, they say things like that, 'he done it himself' .. which is bad grammar"
>
> "One of them's a Cockney accent, the other one's common, I mean umm common and posh one"
>
> "The first one uses slang, the second one uses proper English"
>
> "'we was playing football by them cars' / That's slang / How do you know it's slang, it's not slang is it? / It's not proper English is it?"

The following snippet of dialogue is particularly interesting for what it suggests of the difficulties in assigning dialectal features to region and/or social class:

> "'We ain't got none' is Yorkshire / 'We ain't got none' is umm common, it's an inner city yob / No, no, no, no, it's sort, no, 'We ain't got none' is something like farmers would say, the old traditional farmers / It's what people round here say, 'we ain't got none', that's what I say, actually"

The two pupils suggest that this might equally well be part of a well-established rural dialect ('old traditional farmer') as of an 'deviant' urban dialect ('inner city yob'); yet it could also be claimed as the local (south-east, suburban) dialect, and as typical too of a northern county. A group of three girls in another school had a very similar discussion:

> "'We ain't got none' is like a farmer / No, because I say 'ain't' and all that, 'We ain't got none' / [All laugh] / [in 'posh' accent>] 'We haven't got any, we haven't got any', I'd go / [..] It's more, I don't know / 'We ain't got none' is sort of Cockney, you know, 'we ain't got none', and then this is 'we haven't got any', you know. Well it could be us or that could be us, either could be us really / Yes but it could be anybody because / Yes but that is more Cockney, 'we ain't got none', innit? / Yeah, more teenagers would say that"

In a sense what these discussions in part reflect is the continuing movement towards the disappearance of traditional dialect boundaries, particularly regional delineations, and the consequent difficulty in assigning a number of widespread (particularly grammatical) features to discrete dialects. (What they also reflect, of course, is the pupils' own linguistic range, "either could be us really": they move along a continuum of language use, making choices, conscious or unconscious, according to situation, audience, and so forth.)

On the question of standard English too, the discussions of the 13-14 year olds in our study show that the issues are not so clear-cut as the press might have us believe. Though they agreed to some extent on what constituted 'proper' English, there was occasional lively debate around the notion of the imposition of a standard, suggesting the complex ways in

which identity and language are intertwined. Moreover, it was in the urban school where non-standard forms were most evident in pupils' speech that these conversations commonly took place, indicating a keen awareness of the issues involved on the part of those very pupils whose linguistic identities were perhaps more on the line.

> "I think, the way we talk is proper English yeah .. but / It's not / Well, it's proper English for us though isn't it? / Yeah, for us .. I know what you mean, I know what you mean / Well, that's what I think .. and I thinks that umm .. posh people, like really snobby teachers and everything, they, that's .. yeah, Miss X., she doesn't speak proper English / No, no .. no! No! that's not snobby, that's just the way they want to speak / So? / That's like (...) it's just the way they want to speak, any, none, there isn't a proper English, it's just people speaking how they want to / Yeah! there you go then"

> "but you've got nothink that is actually English / Nothing, exactly .. it's when you don't pronounce your 't's and things / Yeah, but then there's loads of people that don't pronounce 't's and things / I do sometimes / And then you've got .. (...) and then you've got other people right umm that don't, that do it all the time / Exactly / And then you've got people with accents and things, but you can't, you can't exactly say that they're not English, cause they'd most probably say that about us / No, it means proper English / Yes, but there isn't a proper English / I don't get what you're saying / (...) going to have an argument (...) / English is all one language / Yeah, it's one language, but you can't .. and there's different ways of speaking / But it's different accents, there's no proper .. English accent that you've got / There, there is, it's, you're supposed to / (...) like, listen .. you're supposed to say a word the way it's written down, like .. 'like' or 'love' .. or something like that / Or 'little', we say 'li(tt)le' [with glottal stop] (...) 'little' / 'Little', yeah, people say 'li(tt)le', and it's supposed to be 'little' / Yeah, but then / It's just the way you say it, that doesn't make it .. proper English"

These pupils are certainly aware of the unequal status of pronunciation, and are beginning to question the imposition of a 'standard' - "there isn't a proper English, it's just people speaking how they want to". The point was made equally forcibly during another group's discussion in the same school:

> "I think people should just speak like they want to / Yeah and no-one should take the mickey out of them, cause it's not their fault"

It was also voiced, though more rarely, in another of the schools:

> "some people might say that I couldn't speak proper English because I say 'ain't' and 'wa(t)er' [with glottal stop] [..] and 'wevver' .. and (...) and stuff like that, so people could just say I don't speak proper English but .. nobody has a right, nobody has a right to really say that though, do they?"

Another group in this school went further in confronting linguistic prejudice in more generalised terms:

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"You can't really, some, a lot of people do judge people by the way they speak .. but if you just sort of met someone, and they, and you just took .. their lifestyle by the way they speak, then .. it's not always true .. often is the case that it's not true"

It is clear that, for the pupils engaging in these discussions, pronunciation is a defining characteristic of speaking 'properly'; the other feature frequently mentioned (by almost half the groups) was the use of 'proper' words, which were most commonly defined in contrastive terms, as not being 'slang':

"if it was proper English it wouldn't have been slang"

"slang words, sort of, not proper, not stuff that's in the dictionary"

"[people not speaking properly] make up words that slang, made-up words"

"there's proper words for things, and like [people not speaking properly] use terms like, a car's, a car's called a car, but they call it a motor"

The examples they gave of not speaking properly included adjectives and verbs currently in use (e.g. 'gutted, chuffed, wicked, tasty, gay' and 'cacked, snog, got off with'); less commonly, swearwords were cited, as was Cockney rhyming slang. However, there were very few examples of single words or phrases given for speaking 'properly'; instead, pupils contrasted whole utterances, showing an awareness of matching speech to situation and audience, and tending to mimic accents:

"Like umm when, when your dad's friends come round, you go 'Oh yes, would you like a cup of tea?' [..] And if you're at school it's like 'Oh, would ya like a cuppa?' or 'D'you want a cuppa?', or something, don't you? / [laughter]"

"I say things like [said exaggeratedly slowly >] 'Mrs Z, could you pass me a French book please', I don't say, "'ere, Teach, pass us a book, will ya? Chuck us a book!' / [laughter]"

These pupils seemed well aware of the point at issue: that every time anyone speaks, they locate themselves to some degree, whether regionally, socially, educationally, or whatever, through their accent and dialect; and that this is at least partly a choice you make as to how you want to be identified. There were other examples of pupils' awareness of altering their language use in respect of the situations they were in and the people they were speaking with:

"if you're with older, adults, you sort of tend to .. start speaking all poshly"

"I do a milk round [..] and they sort of, they're all talking poshly and well spoken and you have to talk like that to understand them"

"I only talk posh to teachers and people like that, above me, to my friends I don't / Yeah so do I .. when I talk to teachers I try to be really polite"

"If you start talking posh in front of your friends, you might, you might sort of feel a bit stupid"

What are the general educational implications of the debate surrounding non-standard dialects and Standard English? The authors of the English curriculum proposals currently in force (February 1994) dedicated a chapter of their first report (on ages 5 to 11) to Standard English, acknowledging that its place in schools had been so widely debated that they felt it their responsibility to make their own views explicit in order to encourage "further and better informed debate about the responsibility of English teachers in this matter" (DES/WO, 1988: 4.1). There followed a generally sensitive discussion of the issues involved, culminating in some broad principles which included the need to ensure full access to Standard English in school, particularly in relation to its uses in formal, public and written language, but with care not to denigrate the non-standard dialects spoken by many children. It was also acknowledged that Standard English was not, in itself, superior, neither was it fixed and unchanging:

"It changes over time, just as any other language does [..] Moreover, it varies according to style, purpose and audience: no one speaks or writes in the same way on all occasions. Nor should Standard English (a technical term to refer to a dialect which has particular uses) be confused with 'proper', 'good' or 'correct' English" (NCC, 1988: 4.5)

Subsequently, the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) Project, a national in-service language training project that ran from 1989 to 1992, addressed the question of what a pedagogical model of KAL in the dialectal area might look like. (The sensitivity of this, together with the grammar, issue, moreover, was again confirmed in the government's subsequent vetoing of the publication of the materials thus produced, although they remained available at a local level.) It was argued that it is not diversity of accent and dialect that is a problem, but rather the attitudes to such diversity:

"Children have the potential to gain a confident control of a repertoire of language, including Standard English, as long as the school values the diversity of language competence, including that of accent and dialect, which children bring to it" (unpublished LINC materials: 276)

Building on the requirements of the National Curriculum in English, it was suggested that the development of children's understanding of the issues involved should be encouraged; that, by drawing on the pupils' own experience and implicit language knowledge, and by exploring attitudes to language use, teachers might help learners to enrich their own linguistic repertoires, in extending their sense of power and choice over language.

It will be apparent that the emphasis throughout the early documentation arising from the National Curriculum in English was on extending the learners' repertoires (as and where necessary) to include Standard English, while taking care in the process not to denigrate the

pupils' other dialect(s); rather, to extend the continuum along which learners operate as language users. In this respect the issue of appropriacy (in relation to both use and user) becomes salient:

> "dialects are not fixed entities but rather continua with users making choices along the continua [..] the idea of standard English being serviceable for all purposes assumes that there are no contexts where variation along dialectal continua is appropriate" (Carter, 1990: 11/16)

In respect of the notion of prescriptivism, then, the line taken is one of linguistic enrichment rather than replacement, the argument being that it should be "a universal educational goal to empower pupils to use as wide a range of language varieties as competently as possible" (ibid.).

The recommendations of the original English working party were in the main welcomed, albeit somewhat cautiously, by the English teaching profession, whose professional body endorsed "the philosophy of English which underpins the report and the evidence of current good practice on which it draws" (Bain, Bibby & Walton, 1989). In our own interviews with individual teachers, one Head of Department talked of the balance on the dialectal issue being "about right, the valuing of dialect, and the recognition that there is no intrinsic superiority in standard English, but also the recognition that [..] access to it [is] important, for pupils" (12.6.91). Another teacher reflected the thrust of the NC proposals in talking of her broad aims with the pupils in this whole area:

> "to increase their awareness, I suppose, of the variety of ways we use language and the power it has far beyond the words themselves, the power it has to raise blood pressure and emotions and issues [..] I suppose I'm always trying to get that as a [..] message in the classroom [..] every time I have an opportunity to bring out some point about dialect or message or the power of words or the implications of what people, the hidden meanings or messages, I try to bring it out" (5.12.91)

In another school, the response was more cautious:

> "The standard English bit, I think, needs a bit more thought about what we really want to do" (11.6.91)

In fact, it sometimes seemed as though the dialectal issue was, in a sense, not seen as a problem, in that it was almost taken for granted that, in the development of pupils' oral and written skills in school, standard English would be the medium through and in which this would happen. Thus, the dialectal issue surfaced only rarely in interview; similarly, classroom episodes where it was an explicit focus were rarely seen over eight-week periods with year 9 classes (which the teachers claimed to be largely representative of their normal practice with such groups). Where the issue <u>did</u> emerge, it tended to arise chiefly in responsive, individualised feedback on pupils' written work, where, for example, the inappropriate use of non-standard forms might be pointed out by the teacher. The following examples have been selected from written work marked by a teacher in one of the schools: [N.B. Relevant forms are highlighted, and teacher comments or changes follow.]

'to get money off of her mother' > 'from'

'she has not much nice clothes' > 'many'

'It is all about a girl called Hal, well Gloria but everyone called her Hal' > "Try not to use 'well' in written work except in speech"

'Barry is shy, and like he's ashamed of himself' > 'as if'

'as if it came from the sixties or something' > [last two words crossed out]

The point at issue may be the use of non-standard grammar ('much' for 'many', for example); although, in most cases here, the focus is more on stylistic choices varying along spoken/informal and written/formal dimensions of language. Thus, consideration of the dialectal area is overlaid with that of appropriacy of use relating to notions of audience, mode and register, for example: who is this text for, is it spoken or written, planned or unplanned, relatively formal or informal, and so forth.

In the school where commentary in the dialectal area featured more prominently both in interview and in the classroom setting, there tended to be more individualised correction of the use of non-standard forms in pupils' written work (such forms seeming, in any case, to be more prevalent); as the following examples from one pupil's folder illustrate:

'Her Dad's job as a lawyer had took him away' > 'taken'

'the abductor hisself' > 'himself'

I would not of chose it' > 'have chosen'

However, this explicit corrective focus was not seen in the context of the pupils' speech, in either this or the other two English classrooms (or, indeed, in the Modern Languages classrooms), although discussion of non-standard forms was both reported in teacher interview and observed (though rarely) in lessons; indeed, the teacher who occasionally included explicit commentary on accent and dialect in her lessons was at pains to stress the need to respect people's different ways of speaking, as the following lesson extract shows:

"[T] Do you think you have the right to tease people because they speak Standard English? [pupils concur] Do you have the right to tease people because they don't speak Standard English? [pupils concur] Right, there is a very odd .. feeling among many people that you can take the mickey .. you can take the mickey out of people who speak properly, but it's quite okay to speak slang. Sarah Crewe and Helen Forrester [characters in a play] couldn't help speaking properly, they were brought up that way! They didn't mix with kids who spoke slang, so they had no choice. If you're very clever, you can operate both systems"

In this lesson, a worksheet containing a mixture of single words, phrases and sentences under the twin headings 'Slang' and 'Standard English' provided a focus for discussion; the pupils had then to rewrite them as a matching exercise, drawing on their knowledge of the local

dialect to add further examples of their own if they wished. In fact, the teacher was using 'slang' as a hold-all category for a range of dialectal (and indeed non-dialectal) differences, which included non-standard grammar, local dialect terms, school slang, and colloquial expressions in more widespread use which reflected choice of register (along an informal/formal dimension) rather than dialect per se. Included among the non-standard grammatical forms were variations on verb forms, 'I goes, she don't, I done, it was wrote', and adjectives used instead of adverbs, 'it hurts bad, she dresses nice'; local dialect terms included 'shamed up' (for 'embarrassed') and 'floor' (for 'ground'); examples of schoolchildren's slang were 'gutted' (for 'upset') and 'boffin' (for someone clever); and colloquial terms in more widespread use included 'a load of', 'fed up', 'take the mickey' and 'he fancies her'. 'Slang' was characterised overall as 'friendly chat talk' that 'any friend or local people or family will understand', Standard English as 'well-organised speech' able to be understood by 'any stranger who speaks English [..] wherever she lives'; and the teacher overtly stressed throughout what she perceived as the relative capacity of 'slang' to be more powerfully expressive:

> "often Standard, proper English is not as <u>powerful</u> as spoken slang [..] <u>mostly</u>, I think slang is more powerful than Standard English"

In another school, although work on the dialectal area was not seen in practice, reference was nevertheless made to this in the 'Year nine entitlement', more briefly under 'Writing', "Standard English [should be] used where appropriate", and at more length under 'Speaking and Listening':

> "Pupils should consider specialist and regional dialect vocabulary i.e. local uses of vocab., terms specific to certain age groups, jargon used in given jobs. Pupils should look at language appropriate in various circumstances and for different purposes. They should especially consider the use of Standard English in formal situations"

Again the emphasis was put firmly on appropriacy of use. In this school, in fact, specific KAL modules were currently (1991/1992) being planned, with the intention that this strong and rather separate focus on perhaps relatively neglected (or, at least, unsystematised) aspects of KAL would gradually diminish in favour of the re-absorption of such topics into the overall curriculum; a module on accent and dialect was envisaged for year 8 pupils, and was being trialled with one class. In this module, planned to run over perhaps three weeks, the topic was split three ways: 'Accent', 'Dialect' and 'Appropriateness of language'. What emerges very saliently from the material provided is a preoccupation as much with accent as with features of vocabulary and grammar, although this is not always overtly signalled; and it is notable that the examples of dialect chosen draw on those areas of the country where it is possible to identify broad dialectal differences (<u>including</u> pronunciation features) - mainly Yorkshire and Scotland. The worksheet featuring "examples of local dialect and slang" is also interesting in the relation it bears to the list of non-standard grammatical features discussed above (see pages 3-4), with virtually all the sample utterances of the local (south-eastern) dialect displaying a majority of those features:

Multiple negation	'I ain't never nicked nothing'
Present tense verb forms	'She don't know what to do'
Past tense verb forms	'I never done it'
Past tense of 'be'	'We was going home'
Negative of 'have'	'I ain't never nicked nothing'

Unusually, in another of the project schools, there was reference (in interview) to discussion of dialectal features of speech in one of the Modern Languages classrooms: in drawing attention to French verb forms, one teacher reported starting from her pupils' knowledge of their own language:

> "and that's quite useful .. because a lot of them don't see any reason why you don't say 'I says' [laughs] .. so we start off with the English, what's the basic word, what letters do you add on, where, etc., and there's a lot of disagreement about this [laughs] .. and then I introduce just maybe the singular of the verb in the French"

The teacher gave a more specific instance of this in a much later interview: it emerged that, in expressing the commonly held assumption that non-standard versions of the language are unsystematic, she had provoked a confrontation with one individual in the class:

> "they didn't accept at first that the English has a system that you can use properly .. I remember having a big confrontation with one of them at the beginning as to whether you needed an 's' on the end for the 'he' and 'she' form of the English, you know, so I mean there was really a non-acceptance of <u>that</u> at the beginning"

This incident suggests the very real difficulties inherent in trying to prescribe 'correct' usage, given that language use and identity are so closely bound up together; if we label as 'incorrect' features of their own daily language use, then we are bound to meet with hostility from learners. Writing nearly two decades ago, Trudgill (1975) proposed a number of reasons why seeking to teach spoken standard English in school is unlikely to succeed. In particular he suggested that learning to speak a new dialect of the same language is a very difficult task, and also that the most important influence in determining what dialect schoolchildren use is their peer-group - and it is unlikely that they will choose to isolate themselves from their friends. On the first point, Trudgill suggests that with a new dialect it is difficult to learn which aspects of the native variety to reject and which to retain, since the two linguistic varieties are so similar that it is difficult to keep them apart; and he points out, furthermore, that since no particular <u>communication</u> advantages arise from learning a new dialect, motivation to learn is small (ibid., 78). However, he agrees that there is a case for the teaching of <u>written</u> standard English:

> "not because this dialect is 'correct' or even 'appropriate', but because it may be socially and economically advantageous to children when they leave [school]" (ibid., 80)

He points out that the complexities involved in handling a new dialect in writing are considerably reduced because it is a much less automatic process; also, there is much less psychological involvement with the written language than with the spoken, since there is not the same question of social allegiance. In fact, the thrust of the original English curriculum proposals (DES/WO 1989) seems to be allied to such thinking: the report did not advocate strict prescriptive guidelines on the teaching of Standard English (particularly in regard to speech), but rather suggested that there should be a focus on notions of appropriateness and choice:

> "there should be the beginnings of the expectation of Standard English in written work when appropriate by the age of 11; [..] the provision of opportunities for oral work where spoken Standard English would be a realistic expectation in the secondary school; and [..] all pupils should be in a position to choose to use Standard English in speech when appropriate by the age of 16" (4.38, added emphasis)

In contrast, the suggested revision of the English proposals was much more prescriptive: where the original proposals had sought to extend learners' linguistic repertoires in order to give them more choice and control over their language usage, the new aim seemed a much more unitary imposition of the standard dialect. This shift in emphasis is very evident in the revised Attainment Targets for both speaking and listening, and writing, where there is a move away from the recognition that language development will need to take account of a wide array of purposes, audiences and situations, and towards an insistence on 'standard English' as the central channel for communication:

> "The development of the abilities to: communicate effectively and speak standard English; listen closely and with understanding" (1993) [in contrast with "The development of pupils' understanding of the spoken word and the capacity to express themselves effectively in a variety of speaking and listening activities, matching style and response to audience and purpose" (1989)]

> "The development of the abil[illegible] to convey meaning effectively in written standard English" (1993) [in contrast with "A growing ability to construct and convey meaning in written language matching style to audience and purpose" (1989)]

At a more fundamental level, there is a conflict here between the demands of induction into the mass communication practices of our culture and the personal needs of the individual. Of course everyone must have access to the standard language; but neither should individuals be denied the free and proper use of their personal dialects. Indeed, to go further, discussion of the issue would be enhanced if the polarising notions of 'good' and 'bad', 'proper' and 'incorrect' were brought out into the open and examined as part of the issue, rather than taken as undisputed 'givens'.

Teachers do, indeed, have an important role to play. Our study of 13 and 14 year olds provided some evidence that pupils operate with a number of 'folk'-linguistic notions, derived more from the communities in which they live than in the classroom. This is not to say that they do not display some sophisticated ideas: on the contrary. However, such ideas

need to be challenged and/or confirmed in the classroom too. Teachers need not only to develop and extend their pupils' language skills in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes, but also to examine and explore the ideas about language pupils bring with them to the classroom. The challenge facing our teachers goes far beyond that of teaching their charges to speak and write 'proper' English. We are confronted daily with a barrage of messages about the ways we speak, many of them unexamined and undisputed, and often implicit in what we see, hear and read. (My four-year-old is already absorbing a message about language and identity via a popular TV animal series where the 'villain' foxes drop their aitches in an 'urban' and working-class accent, while their 'goodie' counterparts speak in impeccable middle-class tones.) The nation's children need their teachers to help them develop and extend their language in a multiplicity of ways (including their use of standard English). They also need help to confront and explore the linguistic prejudices they meet with in their daily lives.

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